Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Saturday, October 5, 1991, 8:30 a.m.

THE VALUE OF OUR COMMITMENTS

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL

Matthew 25:14-30

> "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance."
> [Matthew 25:29a]

The subject is not money but responsibility. The sentence could read, "to all who have much responsibility, more will be given, and they will have an abundance of responsibilities." They will also be very busy, Jesus might have added... For it is the iron law of voluntary organizations, is it not? Volunteer once, and you're caught; do a good job and your reward is another, bigger job. Open your mouth and offer an opinion on how the task might be accomplished, and you will be asked to do it; chair the committee, raise the money, organize the dinner, take out the trash - whatever. "Those who have, get more..." Responsibility. What better example than us?... a beautiful fall Saturday morning when most of the world is playing golf, taking walks, enjoying coffee and paper, sleeping in - and here we are, at a church meeting!

Henry Copeland, President of the College of Wooster, began a fine convocation address on the topic by retelling Aesop's Fable, "Belling the Cat."

The mice lived in a state of perpetual fear because of the constant menace which hovered over their very existence. So they held a general meeting to discuss what measures they might take to outwit the enemy, the Cat.

A young mouse rose to speak:

> "You will all agree that our chief danger consists in the sly and treacherous manner in which the enemy approaches us. Now, if we could receive some signal of her approach, we could easily escape from her. I venture, therefore, to propose that a small bell be procured and attached by a

And in that tiny dynamic, which does not happen one day once-and-for-all, but is a process, a slow retreat over the years, in that small dynamic there is a fatal moral flaw.

"The sin of respectable people," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "is running from responsibility." You know Bonhoeffer's story - the German pastor who took a public stand against Naziism, eventually cast his lot with the resistance and joined with an assassination attempt against Adolph Hitler, was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945 just before the end of the war. Before he was a martyr, Bonhoeffer was an academician, a distinguished scholar. His academic speciality was Ethics.

And for him, the basis of Christian ethics was responsibility. Bonhoeffer, the ethics scholar, taught that "personal experience of God's judgment and grace also included consciousness of a larger humanity to which we belong."

That tragic 20th century divorce between private and public discipleship, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified, is ironically seen best in the people who found it possible to go to church on Sunday morning and on Monday go to work in their jobs in a concentration camp where thousands of people were being gassed. One of his biographers put it this way: "Bonhoeffer's fundamental view of ethics was that a Christian must accept responsibility as a citizen of this world where God has placed him/her." [See Life Together, John W. Doberstein, p. 7-13]

Do you ever wonder what you would have done? I do... and I conclude that we might, in a moment of impulsive heroism, have done the right thing. But what made Bonhoeffer a martyr was not a moment of impulsive heroism, but a carefully reasoned theological position. He concluded that believing in Jesus made him a responsible citizen of this world.

Bonhoeffer's proposal - that Christian discipleship begins with responsible citizenship - is, I would propose, terribly important today, even more so than it was fifty years ago.

The topic of a responsible sexual ethic will not go away, unfortunately. If we know anything about the topic, it is that articulating the traditional moral maxims about sex may make us feel good, but will have absolutely no impact on the way people behave sexually. And, in fact, because of religion's refusal to be responsible, it may contribute - indeed does contribute - to an epidemic of unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, child abuse and abandonment.

The kind of society we want to be, the kind of nation, continues to be before us and is determined in the political arena as representatives struggle with the hard realities of money and national defense and education and health care.

Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Friday, October 4, 1991, 7:00 p.m.

THE VALUE OF YOUR MONEY

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, IL

Mark 10:17-27

How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!

My, I wish he hadn't said that!... In his book, Harvard Diary, child psychiatrist, teacher and author, Robert Coles, reports his research on how children of wealthy families come to their values. He was particularly interested in how religious, church families dealt with the ethical issues of their own wealth. A prosperous New Orleans attorney said...

> "I can find passages to make me feel good about this life I've always enjoyed, and always will enjoy until I die. But I have a legal mind - I majored in English, liked literary criticism...so I can't overlook what I read. I can't turn a clear-cut message into a confusing one... He gave us that unforgettable image of the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Well, I guess I'm one big camel, and even now, I can anticipate the crunch I'll be in."
>
> Coles said: "It was one of the most Biblical moments I will ever experience - the sight and sound of a professing Christian aware that he was in deep trouble." Harvard Diary, "Christ and the Rich," p. 19-21]

It is a troublesome topic, this matter of Christ and wealth. There was a legendary incident once involving John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller was the wealthiest Protestant layperson in the country. He was a devout Baptist.

Rockefeller had a vision of the church of the future - non-sectarian, rational, world-embracing. He wanted the leading preacher of the day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, to be the pastor.

The young man fades and Jesus makes an observation about wealth which astonishes his disciples. The official teaching of Judaism was that wealth is ordinarily evidence of divine blessing. But Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been some very imaginative attempts to get us out from under that one. In fact, the textual scholars who spend their time examining ancient manuscripts under a microscope say that there is evidence that this text has been tampered with repeatedly. We aren't the first ones, apparently, to wish he didn't say it or mean it.

Later scholars would try to help by pointing out that the Greek word for "rope" is quite similar to the word for camel and that what Jesus probably said was that it is easier for a rope, a piece of twine, to go through the eye of a needle. At least the image is consistent. The task is difficult, but, in a sense, doable.

The most imaginative effort is the suggestion that ancient city walls had small openings through which late arrivers might safely enter the city without the danger of opening the gates. This opening, they contend, was called the "eye of the needle." A camel could get through on his knees, with his owner pushing and pulling. It's a wonderful image. Preachers on Stewardship Sunday have been known to suggest that loaded camels, particularly, are going to have difficulty, and that the way to squeeze in is to unload some of the goods - as in a pledge to the church. It is an approach to fund raising not to be taken lightly. Scholars trace this interpretation to the ninth century and sadly conclude that the whole matter is spurious.

What we really must do is go back and look again at this interesting, wealthy young man. What actually was wrong with him? He's not bad. In fact, he's good, admirable, upright, generous and he is theologically sensitive. He's got courage and character. What's wrong here? What about him causes him to miss the grace and love of Jesus Christ? He is, by the way, the only person in the gospel of Mark, who Jesus calls and who does not respond by following. He can't. He's not free to do this. That's what is wrong. He's imprisoned, I think, by his possessions. He's even sorry about it. There's a sense in which he knows what's wrong. In point of fact, what Jesus teaches him is that he doesn't own a thing actually. He's owned by his possessions, in service to them, dependent on them for happiness, security and joy.

He has worked so hard, been so successful, accomplished so much that there is no room in his life for grace; maybe there is a very fundamental character defect here. He's in a hurry, no

done all that the law required and still didn't feel right, Jesus "looking upon him, loved him." And then later, it happened again. The disciples are astonished at the eye of the needle business and Jesus "looks at them" in love and compassion and grace. This is personal. This is very near the heart of the matter for them and for us.

I think there is a sense in which he was absolutely, literally, fundamentally, accurate about the way things are with you and me - 2,000 years later.

There is a sense in which you and I don't own a thing which we are not willing to give away.

There is a sense in which you and I are owned by whatever we cannot and will not give away: a sense in which who we are is defined very precisely by what we can or cannot give away.

That's the issue here. Let's not resolve it too easily and let's not compromise it. With the disciples, I am astonished - not simply by the demands he seems to be making of me - but by the truth I know in what he said. I identify with that rich young man. I don't own anything I can't give away. You can't live until you know something for which you are willing to give everything, including your life.

The final word is grace. Truly. Costly grace. With God all things are possible. You don't have to force it, or drag it in. He said it. "All things are possible with God," including that most unlikely thing of all - our salvation. He's not done with that young man. "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." God wants all of us to live fully, joyfully, free from frustration, anxiety and fear.

It's what the Gospel is about.

There is no resolution in text, nor is there much of a concluding resolution to these reflections. The words must take their own shape in your life - in ways known best and only to you. But do hear them again:

" - go - sell - give - come - follow - and you will have treasure in heaven."

Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Friday, October 4, 1991, 8:30 a.m.

THE VALUE OF YOUR SOUL

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL

Mark 8:34-37

Some time ago I was part of a seminar in Washington which brought together a group of Presbyterian ministers and government officials who happened to be Presbyterians. There were twelve of us. We were in a van, waiting at the gate of the White House. A Secret Service man asked us for our driver's licenses in order to do a security check. Mine was lost; more accurately, it had been stolen. In any event, all I had on my person with my name on it was a church business card and the church credit card. I tried the business card. The Secret Service man disappeared into his office, returned with security badges, the kind you wear around your neck, with the licenses clipped on. When he came to me, he said, "Mr. Buchanan, may I talk with you?" I climbed out of the van amidst the laughter of my colleagues who were telling him that I was indeed a very real threat to national security. He asked if I didn't have anything which would simply assure them that I was who I claimed to be. Apparently I had lost more than my wallet and some money... my identity was at stake. So I pulled out the church American Express Card which does have my name on it. He seemed to be greatly relieved. I was approved. American Express got me in the White House when my word, the assurances of my distinguished colleagues and my employment at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago were brushed aside. I'm glad I had not left home without it.

Shortly thereafter, I encountered a John Updike short story entitled The Wallet. It is about Fulham, a retired broker, who "had assembled a nice life after thirty years of marriage,... handsome white house in the older suburbs."

Fulham spends his time managing his own investments and those of a favored few old clients in an upstairs room. Every morning he goes to his room with the Wall Street Journal, a second cup of decaffeinated coffee, to make phone calls, look out the window at his neatly manicured lawn, to survey and enjoy the world he has gained.

And it is a particularly relevant topic for our day. We are asking strong and tough and courageous questions in a renewed way these days. Perhaps the notoriety of the television preachers has embarrassed us into taking our religion more seriously, inspiring us to an inquiry as to what exactly this stuff we say we believe is all about. For sure, their financial indiscretions, while not as interesting as some of their other indiscretions, have forced all of us to look carefully at how we collect and manage and use the resources our people give us. Perhaps the challenge of the new biology, the environmental crisis, the continuing tragedy of urban deterioration... Rosemary Radford Reuther says that all the accumulated and neglected problems the world has ignored for centuries are demanding attention in the next decade. In any event, I am convinced that there is a new integrity and urgency of spirit alive in our culture. We want substantial religion. We want religion that can assume a place of respectable dialogue in the university. The most popular course at Harvard recently, is Harvey Cox's basic Christianity and Culture. We want a faith capable of conversation with the world about the great issues confronting us. We are embarrassed, resentful in fact, when our faith becomes a caricature, a reactionary bastion of worn-out and irrelevant moralisms.

We're ready for tough, courageous religion - which doesn't hide behind pious gestures and cliches.

For another thing, we now know that the "new narcissism," the whole gospel of happiness through materialism, acquisition, accumulation, "whoever dies with the most toys wins" is a lie. It doesn't work. It isn't true.

In the current bestseller, Fire in the Belly, about men, but not exclusively for men, Sam Keen talks about how we tie identity to work and income and consumerism. Our rites of passage include the games which prepare men for the battles of business and life...the first full-time job...and then getting a credit card. "The credit card," Keen says, "is for the modern male what killing prey was to a hunter... The Visa Card is an insignia of membership, a sign that the system trusts you to spend what you have not yet earned. In modern America going into debt is an important part of assuming the responsibilities of manhood and womanhood. Debt, the willingness to live beyond our means, binds us to the economic system that requires both surplus work and surplus consumption. The popular bumper sticker 'I owe, I owe, so off to work I go,' might well be the litany to express the commitment of the working man." [p. 51-53]

Sam Keen and other writers are joining a growing chorus of voices suggesting that our models are wrong and that if our soul, identity, is defined in economic terms alone - profits, consumerism, acquisitions, security - we are working with a very low and inadequate view of our humanity.

> "My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong flagship brands like Southern Baptist into one identifiable. Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis - solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and somewhere to go before brunch. After test- marketing various possibilities, I have decided upon the name Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch, for ad purposes. I will not be sure of MacChurch's theology until focus groups are run, but I plan on following the promotional path blazed so successfully by Holiday Inn. In other words, this will be your 'no surprises' church. When Dad brings the family here, he can be sure that they will not be asked to speak in tongues, handle snakes or give money to the Sandanistas."

Now, no one is quite that bold about it, but there is among us the sense that if we were a little more market conscious, if we stopped asking people to give and started giving them what they want, we might be more successful. And there are plenty of success models to emulate.

However, just at the moment we begin to be convinced that the market strategy is correct, just when we inquire seriously of the super suburban churches booming with growth, just as we shift the weight of our theology to the supply side of the ledger, here comes Jesus - saying things like:

"If any comes after me and does not hate his own life - renounce all that he has...he cannot be a disciple..."

and

"What does it profit to gain the whole world and lost one's soul..."

and

"Whoever would save life will lose it and whoever would lose life for my sake will save it..."

and

"If one would come after me - deny self - take up a cross and follow..."

The psychiatrists and psychologists know that the more we give away the more we have. The more we hoard, save, protect and squeeze - the less we have and are. The issue is our own souls.

BLEST BE THE TIE

October 27, 1991

9:30 and 11:15 a.m. Worship Services

Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 31:7-9
Hebrews 11:1-3, 13, 12:1-2

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."
-Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV)

Robert Shaw, who is a poet and a professor of English at Mt. Holyoke, has described his formative memories of church and religion in a way that sounded familiar to me and which may cause you to smile in recognition as well. He was writing an essay in a wonderful collection entitled Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament. Mr. Shaw's assignment was to write on the Book of Hebrews.

> "My mother's father was a Presbyterian minister, and until I was four my parents, my brother and I lived with my grandparents next to the church. We spent a lot of time there perforce. My first impressions of Christian worship were vividly sensory in ways that my age would explain. Parents attempting to make small boys look proper for Sunday dressed them in suits with short pants then, and I remember how the cushions of the pews, stuffed with horsehair, prickled my legs as they dangled above the floor. Sitting next to my grandmother I would look at the stained glass or the people around us, most of whom seemed very old. The white-haired ladies, always wearing hats, all knew my name, although I could never tell them apart. They carried large pocketbooks, which were black in the winter and white in the summer, and out of which came lavender-scented handkerchiefs, change purses, spectacles, peppermints and much else. My grandmother had her own supply of peppermints which she doled out to me if I seemed restless." [p. 268]

> "There are times when together we discover that we make up a single body, that we belong to each other and that God has called us together as a source of life for each other." [Weavings, July/August 1990]

The idea is that we become more in relationship than we are in isolation. And furthermore, that human communities, even the smallest and most modest, have generative and healing and life-giving power. Everybody has a church, someone observed; whether or not you belong to the institution. Everyone has a small group of people - maybe only one other - with whom you share joys and sorrows, whose presence affirms and supports you, whose company you seek. When someone you love dies, the hands of that community begin to reach out to you and to gather you in. When your grandchild is born, it is to these people you bring the pictures. "A church within a church" it has been called...realistically acknowledging that in a large, diverse, urban congregation like this one, not everyone can be connected to everyone else...

Group therapy, a family reunion, coffee together, a phone call once a week... the religious word for it is Communion; the creedal designation is "Communion of Saints." The Biblical image is that "cloud of witnesses" which surrounds each of us.

You don't have to be saintly to get into that cloud of witnesses. "Saintly" has come to mean pious or a paragon of moral virtue. "She's a saint," "he's no saint," are moral descriptions, ordinarily. Originally "saintly" didn't mean that at all. The writer of the Book of Hebrews was addressing a community of Christians in the First Century who were facing almost certain persecution and who were not at all certain that they were strong enough to endure. Some of them were going to suffer, be arrested, maybe tortured, executed. So instead of admonition, the writer calls the role of heroes and heroines from the past: men and women who were faithful against all the odds and in the midst of some very frightening circumstances. "That's who's in the cloud of witnesses for you," he told them. "You aren't alone! Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Gideon and David and Samuel are with you... and Rahab the harlot!"

Just in case you are thinking that only saintly people get into the communion of saints, there's Rahab, a prostitute whose clients one day include two Israelite spies who are on a reconnaissance mission in Jericho for Joshua, but end up at Rahab's establishment. She hides them from the authorities and thus plays a major role in Joshua's successful campaign against Jericho. Rahab the Saint. Rahab who was faithful by doing what she had to do when she had to do it. Rahab whose presence in the cloud of witnesses encourages us to see that there are many people there who were our enablers, our supporters, whose timely

else, something larger. Saints are those who point sometimes to something in us that we could not see in ourselves.

In his autobiography, Frederick Buechner tells about writing a florid, over-blown essay at prep school and being stunned when Mr. Martin, the teacher, gave him an unheard of 100%. "I think it is not too much to say that from that moment on, I knew that what I wanted to be more than anything else was a writer. Mr. Martin may just have changed the whole course of my life with that preposterous grade." [The Sacred Journey, p. 74]

Your saints pointed the way by having confidence in you, by aspiring much for you, by giving you opportunities, and most of all by showing you strength and resolve and competence in yourself that without them you never would have discovered. Sometimes your saints jolted you. Sometimes a saint has to be pushy and almost rude, sometimes uncompromising in expectation of you and hope for you.

And sometimes by example your saints showed you how to live; showed you how to believe, how to trust, how to love and forgive, how to weep and laugh, how to be a Christian.

At the time of the Reformation the new Protestant church discontinued the tradition of canonizing saints.

Of course there are saints. And on All Saints' Day it's a good idea to identify them and acknowledge their presence in that cloud of witnesses and to thank them. "Mentally populate your own cloud of witnesses," Robert Shaw urges us. Do it today - over lunch - identify your saints. Take a quiet moment, and write out their names and thank God for them.

- The elementary teacher who recognized something in you and would not let you go.

- The scout leader who helped you learn that even your twelve-year-old fingers could function and actually tie a clove hitch.

- The coach who caught you accepting mediocrity in yourself and insisted that you had more to give physically and mentally than you had ever given to anything and therefore didn't know was there.

- The friend who accepted you and overlooked your foibles and stood with you and showed you what loyalty is, or the one who stepped in and fought a fight that was yours and taught you courage.

- The parent who taught you to share and to be strong and to be brave and to forgive.